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1

MESSENGER OF GRACE

Jonah 1:1–3

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. (Jonah 1:1–3)

 It is one thing to know the doctrine of salvation by grace, and quite another to know the grace of the doctrine of salvation. This is the lesson of Jonah, the prophet who knew God’s grace but was challenged by God inwardly to embrace it. Sinclair Ferguson has expressed Jonah’s story in these terms: “It is really a book about . . . how one man came, through painful experience, to discover the true character of the God whom he had already served in the earlier years of his life. He was to find the doctrine about God (with which he had long been familiar) come alive in his experience.”¹

When most people think of Jonah, they think only of the famous fish that swallowed him. Their first question is, Did this really happen? Or, What kind of fish was it? But these questions are incidental to the book.

1. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Man Overboard! The Story of Jonah* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2008), xi.

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Far more importantly, Jonah brings us face to face with such important issues as God's grace for the wicked, God's sovereignty over his servants, and the intense human struggle involved with forgiveness and repentance. Ferguson summarizes, "The Book of Jonah is not so much about this great fish that appears in the middle of the book . . . [but] in order to teach Jonah that he has a gracious God."²

THE PROPHECY OF JONAH

When approaching a book of prophecy, we usually think of future predictions or divine pronouncements for God's people. But the book of Jonah mainly recounts a story from the life of the prophet himself. The closest parallels are the accounts of Elijah and Elisha in 1 and 2 Kings. Indeed, since Jonah begins his ministry shortly after the time of Elijah and Elisha, he likely was one of their immediate successors, and may have been a personal disciple of the latter.

The Bible does not name the author of the book of Jonah, although Jonah may well have written it about his own experience. Some scholars argue that the Hebrew language found in this book is typical of a later period in history, perhaps the time of the Jews' exile in Babylon. But this is not conclusive, especially since Jonah's northern dialect may account for differences in language and style. In short, there is no compelling reason to doubt that this book of Scripture dates from the time frame it describes, the eighth century B.C.

It is helpful to know something about the world in which Jonah lived. According to 2 Kings 14:25, Jonah served as a prophet in the time of King Jeroboam II, one of the many wicked kings of the northern kingdom of Israel. It was now about 150 years since the death of King Solomon, and the nation had long been divided. Ten of Israel's twelve tribes were united as this northern kingdom, while only Judah and Benjamin held to the Davidic throne in Jerusalem and worshiped at the temple that Solomon built.

The northern kingdom had many problems, beginning with constant idolatry and rebellion against the Lord. This was the main issue with which the prophets contended. However, there were political and military problems as well, for just north of them was the Assyrian Empire, the superpower of

2. Sinclair B. Ferguson, "What Jonah Learned," in *The Doctrines of Grace, 2006 Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology* (Philadelphia: Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, 2006), audio recording.

the time. Israel’s constant concern was to maintain her independence and power against this ominous threat.

The prophets of the northern kingdom engaged in two main tasks. The first was to call the kings and the nation to repentance. We find men like Elijah facing down the priests of Baal and confronting the king over idolatry. But the prophets were also messengers of grace. Over and over again, God showed mercy to his wayward people, often through the ministry of these prophets.

It is in this connection that Jonah is mentioned in 2 Kings. For a while, Assyria was divided and suffered from famine, so that Israel’s former boundaries were restored. This was by God’s hand, to demonstrate his grace to Israel, renew their hope, and encourage their repentance. Jonah himself had delivered the good news:

[The king] restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher. For the LORD saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel. But the LORD had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash (2 Kings 14:25–27).

This shows that Jonah was in a remarkable position to view the grace and mercy of God. Israel had done nothing to merit God’s favor; instead, their wickedness deserved God’s wrath. Yet God was merciful. He reached out a hand of favor to woo his wayward people. In this, Jonah had a front-row seat. But as this book records, Jonah still had much to learn about the grace of God, just as we do today.

GOD’S REDEMPTIVE CONCERN FOR THE WORLD

Jonah’s struggle with God’s grace is displayed from the very start of this book. The cause was a most unexpected call from God that shocked and repulsed the prophet. “Arise,” said the Lord, “go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me” (Jonah 1:2). This is the kind of command a prophet might expect to receive: a summons to

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confront the wicked with their sin. So what bothered Jonah so much? Simply this: his knowledge of the grace of God. Jonah had learned what most people do not know, that when God calls us to face our sin his purpose is to show his mercy and thereby to save. Knowing the grace of God as he did, from the very start Jonah suspected God's purposes toward hated Nineveh.

This reminds us that God is aware of all that is happening in the world. Most people think that if they ignore God, he will ignore them. They like to think of God—if they think of God at all—like the blind watchmaker who winds things up and lets them run pretty much as they will. But, says Frank Page, “This text portrays God as one who notices, as a God who is active, and as a God who takes sin seriously.”³ Nineveh was a city that seems to have known little of the true God and was completely given over to evil. However, this does not mean that God knew nothing of Nineveh or that he had yet given over Nineveh to final judgment. The same is true today: people may deny God, but God does not deny them, does not ignore their sin, and does not fail to extend his mercy for their salvation.

This is a truth that many of God's people have struggled to accept. They are all too happy for God's mercy to be extended to them—but not to others! This was very much the case of the ancient Israelites, who prided themselves as God's chosen people. The Israelites possessed the word of the prophets and God's covenant of grace. Yet they forgot that these were held not solely for themselves, but in trust for all the world. The psalmist sang, “May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations” (Ps. 67:1–2). In fact, Israel's call to bless the nations goes back to their very beginning, in God's promise to the patriarch Abraham: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Gen. 12:2).

Jonah is in this respect a figure depicting all of Israel. He resented the idea of Israel's God sending Israel's grace to non-Israelites—especially to the hated Ninevites. The name Nineveh dominated their minds the way Babylon would later strike fear into Jewish hearts. Nineveh was the military capital of Assyria, a place of unbounded violence and evil. The best parallels today would be the most violent terrorist organizations or narcotics cartels, who

3. Billy K. Smith and Frank S. Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, New American Commentary 19B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 226.

strike their victims with a bloodthirsty glee. A visit to the British Museum in London, which contains a fantastic collection of Assyrian artifacts, discovers their own self-depiction as sadistic, genocidal oppressors. Northern Israelites like Jonah—his hometown of Gath-hepher seems to have been in the northernmost region—suffered most from Assyrian depredations. So Jonah was like Christians today who want God’s grace for themselves but God’s judgment against other wicked sinners, especially those who have hurt them. How easy it is for us to ask God’s blessing for ourselves while we pray for him to cure the coworker who slandered our reputation, the thief who broke into our house, or the family member who never had a good word for us. Jonah did not want Nineveh to be blessed because of what Nineveh had done before and what Nineveh might do again. His quarrel with God’s grace was born at least in part of revulsion, hatred, and fear.

But Jonah’s resentment was not directed merely against his national enemies. He seems to have disdained God’s grace for all unworthy sinners. At the end of the book, Jonah explains why he rejected God’s summons to preach at Nineveh: “For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster” (Jonah 4:2). Jonah might have learned this from Exodus 34:6, in which the Lord reveals himself as “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” This truth was reinforced by Jonah’s own dealings with Israel’s wicked king. Despite Jeroboam’s gross sins against God—many of which must have brought affliction to the faithful—God had shown him mercy. By this point, Jonah had had enough of God’s forgiving mercy for the wicked.

God had extended grace to Jeroboam and the idolatrous Israelites, and Jonah had borne this good news. Yet it was not good news to him. He understood why God might show favor to people like himself—was he not faithful?—but he resented God’s grace for the wicked. This self-righteousness lives on today, and it accounts for the failure of many Christians to proclaim the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ joyfully to people they consider unworthy. If Jonah felt this way toward idolatrous Israelites, how much greater must his contempt have been for the idolatrous Ninevites! As each of us looks into the mirror, it would be good to consider ways in which we may harbor a Jonah-like lack of pity on those who have sinned against us.

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A SPIRITUAL ASSESSMENT

We should reflect on the errors revealed by Jonah's disgruntled attitude. We might start by realizing that resentment toward God's grace is a sure sign of spiritual decline. It is not surprising that such thoughts would be revealed even by the prophets in a time like Jonah's. The nineteenth-century expositor Hugh Martin describes them as

“days of Israel's degeneracy, when faith gave place to formalism, and contrite gratitude to cold and supercilious ceremony; when self-righteous pride, singularly enough keeping pace with increasing iniquity and worthlessness, arrogantly claimed right to the privileges of the covenant in very proportion as all the spirit of the covenant was violated; when the close and narrow spirit of legalism, resting its claims on carnal distinctions, and saying, ‘We have Abraham to be our Father,’ superseded the true spirit of Israel.”⁴ A little reflection on Jonah's mentality will remind us of the spirit of the Pharisees in the time of Jesus. Martin comments that Jonah “enacts exactly the part of the Pharisee of the parable, while the publican may represent the waste of heathendom.”⁵

How can we know if we also are approaching such an attitude? If our primary concern in worship is our consumer preferences rather than the God whose name we praise, if we gaze upon the wicked around us and see mainly a threat to our Christian lifestyles instead of perishing sinners in need of the gospel, and if we pray for forgiveness of our sins but justice for the agents of a wicked culture, then it cannot be doubted that the Pharisaical spirit of Jonah is in us.

Secondly, Jonah's resentment reveals a deep ignorance of God. He understood the Lord as his God and Israel's God, but not the God of Nineveh. Martin observes:

Jehovah is the God of the spirits of all flesh, and ruleth over all the nations. Any other or more limited idea of His government, reduces Him, if not to the level, at least to the company, of the local, territorial, geographical gods of heathendom. And thus, by taking a wrong view of the relation of heathendom to the living and true God, the God of Israel, Israel virtually imbibed the very views of heathendom itself.⁶

4. Hugh Martin, *A Commentary on Jonah* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1870; repr. 1958), 6.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, 7.

The true God is God of all the earth and all peoples. If it glorifies him to extend saving grace to Israel and those who have taken the name of Christians, it glorifies him just as much to extend the grace of the gospel to every sinner in the world.

Jonah's resentment further reveals ignorance of himself as a sinner and of God's way of justification. Paul writes, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23–24). The person who realizes this will never look on the gospel offer of forgiveness to everyone with anything other than wonder and joy. A spiritually vibrant Jonah would have gratefully received God's call to preach in Nineveh. He would have been reminded of the way he had been saved out of his sin and justified by free grace, received through faith alone, and would have run to Nineveh on refreshed legs. But it is always the case—as it was in his—that those who have come to stand before God with claims of their own merit, relying at least in part on their works or their heritage rather than wholly relying on God's free grace, will lose enthusiasm for the idea of saving grace for the wicked.

GRACE FOR THE NATIONS

The idea of the gospel call extending to the Ninevites was something new and appalling to the mind of Jonah. Up to this time, God's grace was restricted to Israel. Only Israel received the Passover. Only Israel possessed the temple of the Lord and the sacrifices for sin. But there had been signs of something more, scattered throughout the earlier prophets, especially in the ministries of Elijah and Elisha.

For instance, when Elijah announced a famine on Israel, he departed to live in Gentile regions. "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there," God told him. "Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you" (1 Kings 17:9). Israel's prophet fed by the hand of a pagan, since Israel was famished! Notice the remarkable similarity of this with God's call to Jonah, "Arise, go to Nineveh." This suggests that God's call to Jonah was a warning to unbelieving Israel. If Israel hardened its heart, God would find believers elsewhere to receive his prophets.

Elisha also had dealings with the Gentiles. A Syrian general named Naaman suffered from leprosy and could find no cure. Then his Israelite

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slave girl told him of the prophet, so off went the Syrian to see Elisha. Naaman was healed and went home a worshiper of the true God. This declared that God's saving blessings are not restricted to one nation or tribe, but that all who come in faith will be saved.

These two episodes happen to be the very accounts Jesus cited when he addressed this same matter in the synagogue of Nazareth. Jesus had revealed himself as the promised Messiah, but his hometown would not receive him. So Jesus responded:

I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian. (Luke 4:25–27)

The Nazarenes thought in much the same way that Jonah did:

When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and drove him out of the town. (Luke 4:28)

This shows a clear trajectory between the experiences of Elijah and Elisha, the calling of Jonah to Nineveh, and Jesus' call of the gospel to the nations. God's call to Jonah was part of his grand program to bring salvation to the whole world. This had always been God's plan, just as he said to Israel's father, Abraham: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3).

Jonah had missed this truth. He believed in the grace of God, but resented it when God showed mercy to the wicked in Israel. And he certainly did not believe in the grace of God for all the world. In a sense, he wanted Israel to be glorified, or even just the righteous in Israel to be glorified. What he needed to know is that the purpose of God's grace is that God would be glorified and that his glory should be displayed in all the world.

Jonah feared that God's grace for Nineveh would come at Israel's expense. However, grace never works this way. Grace is not portioned out in servings—if for one, then not for the other. In God's plan, grace abounds through his gospel, so that God's blessing on Nineveh would result in blessing for Israel as well.

In fact, one of the best ways any person or nation can provide for their own need of the gospel is to spread it to others. An example is shown in the history of Christian missions. In the early medieval centuries, Christians on the continent of Europe took great pains to spread the gospel to the British Isles. Strongholds of Christian learning were established in those wild lands, especially the monasteries of Ireland and Scotland. Within a few centuries, however, barbarian invasions had darkened the continent, and in the turmoil the gospel was nearly lost. British Christians noticed this, and in the seventh and eighth centuries missionaries such as Columban from Ireland and Willibrord and Winfrid from Saxon England returned the light of the gospel to Europe. Only because earlier generations of Continental Christians had spread the gospel to Britain—by God’s providential working—was the gospel preserved for their own descendants.

With this in mind, Jonah’s devotion to Israel should have motivated him for the journey to Nineveh. But God had one additional purpose: by sending his grace into the heart of paganism and displaying there his power to save, God meant to provoke his own people to jealousy. This is what God had foretold in the time of Moses, should his people ever turn to idols: “They have made me jealous with what is no god; they have provoked me to anger with their idols. So I will make them jealous with those who are no people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation” (Deut. 32:21). As Hugh Martin explains: God had “a design to rebuke Israel and provoke them to jealousy by sending His prophet to the capital of heathendom. He was giving them a preliminary warning of what their continued ingratitude would render inevitable—the removal of the vineyard from them, and the giving of it to a people who would bring forth the fruit thereof.”⁷

It is difficult not to wonder whether something similar is taking place today in the once-Christian West with respect to the once-pagan lands of the developing world. In many places in Africa, South America, and Asia, the Christian church is expanding rapidly. Evangelists find ready hearers for their witness of the gospel, and missionary prayers seem answered practically as soon as they are uttered. Might God be seeking to provoke jealousy in Europe and America, where few seem interested in Christianity? Surely, this relative disparity in the success of the gospel urges us in the West to repent of our

7. Martin, *Jonah*, 23.

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worldliness and seek the Lord for a renewed outpouring of his Holy Spirit on these lands that once shown brightly with the light of Christ.

It was out of mercy for Israel that God sent his grace to Nineveh, that his covenant people might renew their faith. It was the same mercy for the Jews that sent the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles (see Rom. 11:11), and it is surely in part out of his mercy for the now-decadent Western nations that God has displayed his saving grace to distant peoples throughout the world today.

LESSONS OF GRACE

These lessons are no less relevant today than in the time of the prophet. What are the lessons? First, God's grace must always be the chief delight of God's people; without a humble rejoicing in God's grace, no people, church, or nation can ever stand. Furthermore, the gospel gives a constant reminder to every believer that his or her own salvation is a sovereign, merciful, and unmerited gift from God, no different in kind from the grace received by the most notorious sinner imaginable. Grace humbles us before God, and grace lifts us up in saving faith. Lastly, to know God is to know his grace, and to feel God's grace is to run on winged feet to tell the world, even to tell the Ninevites of our own time.

Jonah's problem was no small one. It was a problem that unless remedied must bring him and Israel to ruin. Surely, this was why God chose Jonah for this mission; it was an act of grace for God to call him. Is God challenging you with his grace? Is God challenging your attitudes toward him, toward the church, toward people whom you resent and fear, and toward the whole world? If he is, it is not only because of his grace for them but also because of his grace for you.